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ABSTRACT

Too often college composition students see language as an end in itself, rather than as a means to realization of self and world, and teachers need to establish a classroom environment that stimulates and demands that students use their language to find out about themselves. Techniques helpful in shaping composition classes toward this end include: begin writing classes by examining style, particularly writing style that appeals primarily to the senses; reduce poetry to single prose statements and turn directions into poetry; play the "sentence game," mixing student and professionally produced sentences for identification; explain the linguistic concept of nominalization and the power--and danger--that lies in naming; recall language's affinity to play in the imaginations of children; use cartoons to illustrate the ability to shape reality or to re-view the world; demonstrate how distance, time, and familiarity influence perception in the context of interviews with foreign students; and finally, incorporate science fiction to lead students to contemplate a world far different from theirs. (Suggestions for specific writing assignments are included.) (AEA)

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PICTURES IN THE CLOUDS: TEACHING WRITING AS A PLAYFUL ACTIVITY

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PICTURES IN THE CLOUDS: TEACHING WRITING AS A PLAYFUL ACTIVITY

If the muse who protects writing teachers had one gift to bestow, I would request that he inscribe "Language Is Play" across the heavens in scintillating permanence. Perhaps a message too large to be ignored would convince my students that adulthood does not demand abandonment of what children engage in instinctively: that the urge to play, to find delight and order, to imagine, and to create a world through imagination are not childish but childlike qualities the wisest and sanest retain. I find student writing painfully anonymous, sterile, dispirited and dispiriting. What is missing is evidence of joy--the joy of engaging in language as a creative and creating process. As a teacher of writing I cannot be assured, of course, that what I do in the time I have will bring about a magical change in students' work or attitudes. But by making language under the metaphor of play the focus of my teaching of writing, I believe I can help students discover and convey at least some of the delight and satisfaction that the act of composing engenders--the same delight, for example, they once had in finding pictures in the clouds.

What I want students to experience is neither revolutionary nor innovative. Nor do I think my view encourages a frivolous or trivial attitude toward writing. The most credible of voices have attested to play's fundamental place in the development of both individual and society. Plato inquired in the Laws, for example: "What, then, is the right way of living? Life must be lived as play, playing certain games, making sacrifices, singing and dancing, and then a man will be able to propiate the gods, and defend himself against his enemies, and win in the contest."[1] And Johan Huizinga's Homo Ludens, he tells us, derives from the author's long-standing belief that all of civilization "arises and unfolds in and as play."[2] Others have known,

as they did, that language is the most human and humane of all play activities. Robert Frost advised a group of Amherst students in the mid 1960's to study poetry, and particularly its metaphoric (i.e., its playful) character, because if they don't, he said, "You are not safe anywhere. . . .You are not safe in science; you are not safe in history."[3] His voice is the echo of that of another teacher, Socrates, who instructed Phaedrus thus: "He who thinks that in the written word there is necessarily much that is not serious, . . .this is the right sort of man, and you and I, Phaedrus, would pray that we may become like him"[4]

What is implicit in these statements is something we do not always help our students to understand, perhaps because it is not immediately self-evident even to us. To most students, reality is a "given," a system to which they must subscribe; in fact, they think education itself is the process by which they will learn (most likely through memorization of facts) what it is they must know about reality. And so they become passive receivers, empty vessels waiting to be filled to overflowing with Truth. But the real truth is that what is "out there"--beyond them in space but not in vision--is the reality they shape for themselves, a forming that occurs through and in language in the most creative kind of play they can engage in. Education does not fill them up; it fills them out with insights, with information, with knowledge that they can bring to bear on that forming. The Whorf-Sapir hypothesis may not be Ultimate Truth, and the semanticists who popularized its tenets may have instilled more logophobia in language users than is healthy, but the implications for teachers of what they were saying are humbling indeed. The notion that it is language that is the means by which a world can be composed and thus participated in is such a powerful idea that it at one time both enobles our profession and makes us wonder if

we are able to accomplish what it demands of us. Our knowledge of language gives us as teachers the opportunity to help students play with and in the world with growing confidence, maturity, and knowledge. And that is a high calling indeed.

As a means by which this play takes place, language too is enhanced, raised far above its all too frequent characterization as only a "tool of communication." Some students, perhaps too well taught in school, see language as as end in itself, not as a means to realization of self and world. And so language becomes a circumscribed body of knowledge, somewhere outside of (often tantalizingly distant from) students, but knowledge containable in some book which, if it could just be identified, could be mastered. They complain that "they know what they want to say but don't have the words to say it." I often think they imagine language facility as having access to a well-stocked chest of drawers. Top drawer, verbs; below that, nouns, with smaller things like modifiers, prepositions, and conjunctions somewhere near the bottom. Their aim in learning language is to be able to have a bigger supply of items, to be able to more easily find the word the "thing" needs for expression. So they identify their "writing problem" as a lack of vocabulary, and they reach for a thesaurus or buy Thirty Days to Word Mastery. Our job as teachers should be to show them that they have language inside them, ready to shape and clothe their thoughts, to form and re-form their ideas. What we should be doing is establishing an environment that stimulates and demands their use of language to find out about themselves, to help them take part in this creative and magical "making" of the world. Those who use language most creatively and playfully are called poets (the word poet means "maker"); it is not beyond our students to be poets in these terms. During an interview with Archibald MacLeish reprinted in the July 9, 1978 New York Times, the poet was asked what he, having arrived at the wisdom

of his mid-80's, knew about writing that he had never understood before. MacLeish told of reading the Robert Fitzgerald translation of the Odyssey to his wife Ada as they were vacationing in Bermuda recently. He had found a line in the eleventh book translated in a way that revealed a new truth to him. Odysseus had told his story to Alkinoös, who says that Odysseus has related a tale, "as a poet would, a man who knows the world." MacLeish said, "Those are the words I needed for years. Who does know the world? Not the businessman. Not the scientist. Yes--Shakespeare, Homer, Dante." And another poet, Wallace Stevens, writes the same truth in his "The Idea of Order at Key West." Hearing a girl sing, the poet was led to describe her as the "single artificer of the world" and to say

> Then we, as we beheld her striding there alone,
> Knew that there never was a world for her
> Except the one she sang and, singing, made.[5]

That is what I think we should take upon ourselves as teachers of writing: helping students sing with language and make their worlds. They need our aid in engaging in what J. Mitchell Morse says is the particular glory of the humanities--"the dancing of the mind."

And so I take my stand for Language as Play, not to discount Purposefulness or Seriousness or even Utilitarianism as aims for our profession, but to work toward them in the best way possible. Good writing--that is, writing that is truthful, meaningful, valuable to the writers and to others--is born and nurtured when we help awaken students to the power they have as users and enjoyers of language. I want to shape my composition classes to this end, focusing not just on language as students use it in writing, but on the joy of that endeavor--the joy of using language, the joy of understanding the nature of language. The descriptions of some of the things I do and assign in my writing classes that follow can demonstrate how I enact my belief in that principle.

Many of the composition texts I've seen talk about style--the shaping of thought in language--near the end of the book, as if it were part of the editing process, a kind of "flowering up" of the prose, swirled on like fancy icing on a plain old cake. Not out of perversity, but out of conviction, I begin with my writing classes by examining style--that is, language in use. It seems to me to be the only logical place to begin, since thought cannot form except through words, with words, once set down, forcing a writer to re-form that thought, the processes of language and thinking being intertwined in a playful, magical way. I like to give materials early in the quarter that I hope will involve students in this playing with and enjoyment of language, to remind them of the aesthetic and intellectual pleasure they get from words put together in pleasing patterns, words whose rhythms and structures grow organically out of their content and function. We often begin by looking at the kind of writing that appeals primarily to the senses, the kind where meaning has been deliberately obscured in favor of the more fanciful delight in sound. I have used Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky," for instance, or some of the delightful nonsense of Edward Lear to demonstrate this appeal. (The fact that much of the kind of writing I'm looking for is found in work intended for children needs to be talked about too.) Coupled with these selections, I distribute passages of "functional" prose--recipes, directions, information-carrying passages of the most utilitarian kind. The textbooks my students use often provide many examples, although I avoid selecting from the most bruisingly jargonish ones, looking instead for what is clear, precise style. Then we read examples (I have used ones from Walden or Orwell's Road to Wigan Pier) where the style is fluid, pleasing, consciously developed, consonant with meaning and purpose. Our discussions of the selections are focused, not on discovering why one style is "better" than

another (the whole point I'm trying to clarify is just the opposite!), but on how the styles of each kind are eminently suitable and generic to the material. Sometimes I demonstrate the inevitable melding of form and function by having them see how difficult it is to separate the two. For instance, I ask them to reduce a poem like Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool" into a single prose statement. I find this poem a particularly easy one to do this to, and a very effective one to show just what happens with reduction. Or we may try writing in poetry directions that could be included with a do-it-yourself bookcase, and we discuss what would happen if directions were in this form. These activities, coupled with constant reminders of what we are discovering about what style is, leads to a classroom exercise I call the "Sentence Game." Each student is asked to write as well-framed, consciously "stylish" a sentence as he possibly can on a subject I give them--perhaps competition, work, leisure. They put their sentences on index cards, and to the collection I add five or six drawn from professional writing on the same subject. I look for ones where the vocabulary or allusions are not dead give-aways. Writers like E.B. White or George Orwell are likely sources. In class I read the sentences aloud in random order, the object being for the class to decide by hand vote which are student- or professionally-produced. I have found students' work often wrongly (but very rightly) identified. Those sentences which manage to "fool" the class I write on the board for close discussion of what makes them successful--their euphony, balance, climactic order of elements, their appropriate tone, etc. Finally I ask students to write a paper addressing what it "means" to have a style and what considerations they as writers should ponder if they are trying to develop one. I frame the assignment in this way: I excerpt from any one of a number of writing texts some remarks on Developing a Style. The advice usually begins: 1. Find the Right Word. 2. Try Repetition. (or 2. Avoid Repetition.) I tell the students

to assume that the publishers of this text are planning a revision and are soliciting student opinion about what would be useful advice. They are to write a letter explaining what they would offer.

The linguistic term for the focus of a set of assignments I use as we work with the nature of language is "nominalization"; I call it playing the "naming game," but as we know, a name by any other name is. . . . What I want students to grasp with these assignments is the process by which a piece of the world is segmented, identified, and given reality through being named. We discuss the principle that the word assigned is not the thing, but only the symbol of the thing, but we prove this truth through demonstration. For the period of a class session, we decide to assign new names for things--perhaps "tooky" for book or pencil, "galumph" for student, "drumpel" for teacher, etc. No other symbol is permitted for that period, yet after the first few minutes talk can proceed normally. I ask what we have discovered about names. I also sometimes assume a Teacher's role and ask leading questions: "Did you know that to an Eskimo, man is tri-partite: body, soul, and name? What does this mean? What happens if someone drags that man's name through the mud? Does this fact have anything to do with the fact that slaves in America were named by their masters and with their masters' names? Why do you suppose the U.S. Weather Service officially retired the name Betsy after the bad hurricane season in the 1960's? And why Robert for a hurricane this year? What does it mean to you as a student when our university's Office of Budget became the Office of Expenditure Control? Can you guess what happened?"

What I'm trying to move students toward is a recognition of the power--and danger--that lies in naming. Two writing assignments I use ask students to examine the dual possibilities of naming. For one, I distribute a section from Gertrude Stein's lecture, "Poetry and Grammar."

> People if you like to believe it can be made by their names. Call anybody Paul and they get to be a Paul call anybody Alice and they get to be an Alice perhaps yes perhaps no there is something in that, but generally speaking, things once they are named the name does not go on doing anything to them.[6]

The assignment asks them what their own experience with their names has been. Have their names "done" anything to them? Did they "get to be" the Wilbert or Cindy Lou they are? What, then, did they become? Or has their name "not gone on doing anything to them"? If that is true, how do they account for it? I have seldom had students unable to write or have something to say about their names; perhaps their undying gratitude or pent-up frustration impels them to fluency, but often that incentive leads them to consider what naming has done or failed to do, and that is what they should be considering. The other side of the naming assignments helps students to come to grips with the power they have within them as shapers of their world, as namers of it. I frame an assignment around this phenomenon, using a delightful book, Noah Jonathon Jacobs' Naming Day in Eden: The Creation and Recreation of Language, a collection of essays relating the story of Adam and his remarkable feat of naming the animals at God's command. I xerox the final paragraph of the first chapter, "Man's Finest Hour," as illustrative, but I would add that the book is a real mine of possibilities for writing topics about language.

> Here was a rank outsider, an orphan and a bachelor to boot, who stepped forward to the dizzy edge and took possession of the world. He accepted his uniqueness. Why could not his horizontal companions rise above themselves to an upright position and escort man to freedom? They could not take off on the wings of abstraction because they failed to understand the nature of language. Hence, they were left to sniff their way along a cul-de-sac while man set out on a limitless road to make his mark in the world.[7]

What I particularly like about the Jacobs book is its tone, which we as a class examine closely. If we see the writer displaying amused tolerance of Adam, for example, is it in keeping with the seriousness of the act? Or is

Jacobs being serious? How can you tell, I ask? How do you think Adam looked at the moment of Naming? What has he done--or not done? So what is Jacobs saying about Adam as Man himself? The writing assignment I derive asks students to look back into their own experience and recreate what they felt like at some moment when they "took possession" of a part of the world (a concept, maybe, a fear, a piece of knowledge) through naming it. Most importantly, I want them to address the question of what happened to their relationship with the thing named because of their ability to speak of it with a word. What was the "road" that rose before them? To whom or to what could they relate as Adam related to the animals? Or were they still in the cul-de-sac? Why?

Most students will, I think, find that they felt at least some power when they become Namers. But the skeptical tone of the Jacobs' piece cannot be discounted--and that gives us the opportunity to explore the idea that the named world they now say they comprehend is necessarily subject to revision, both by them and by the world. Here I find it useful again to emphasize language's affinity to play. We talk of play-grounds as they remember them, and especially of their capability to "become" anything: today, a battlefield for army games, tomorrow, a bounded area for kickball. Under that metaphor, we can see that the power of the imagination of the players is what makes the ground change, and yet be real enough for the games they engage in. If the will to see, to imagine, is this strong, then how can we be sure that what we see as reality <u>is</u> reality? This is the question that needs consideration--especially by my students, who tend to trust blindly what is objectified and solidified because it is made verbal. The truth is that the world "out there" is not theirs to uncover, but to discover. Walker Gibson draws an analogy between the map-maker and the potter as seers of the world. The map-maker charts the known; the potter gives reality to a blob of clay as his hands form

and shape it.[8] Writers' use of language is their forming of reality, their discovering of self. This is not child's play, but the play of wise men, men who can live in a world comfortably while seeing it as ever-shifting. We aim for composure for our students and for ourselves; we mean that we have settled reality so that we can exist in it. A quotation that can initiate discussion of this point with a class is something James Agee said in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. Agee reflects that his description of George Gudger is inadequate, because "I know him only so far as I know him, and only in those terms in which I know him, and all of that depends as fully on who I am as on who he is." We examine the meanings of the word "know" in that sentence.

I want my students to think about the world as a world of their making, a world real and delightful and full, but a world limited by the knowledge they bring to it. And so I attempt to bring to their attention some of the factors that cause perceptions to change. The following examples represent activities I find useful for examination of what goes on as we shape reality or re-view the world. One the students find particularly fun is working with Saul Steinberg's cartoon of the line. (see p. 14 for the cartoon.) I ask students to continue the line that Steinberg begins and works with, and then we compare the continuations we have made. Very seldom do the students' pictures match, and that gives us a chance to talk about what they have done and what that says about the reality of the line.

There is another cartoon--one of Charlie Brown (the Child-Man in all of us)--which illustrates very well the power and necessity of imagination as a way of discovering. The cartoon shows Charlie and Linus lying on a hillside, gazing into a cloud-filled sky. When Lucy asks them what they see in the clouds, Linus replies that he sees a map of Honduras, a portrait of Thomas Eakins,

the famous English artist, and the stoning of St. Stephen with the apostle John nearby. When Charlie's turn comes, he confesses, "I was going to say a ducky or a horsey, but I changed my mind." I ask students to look at the cartoon in the light of what we have been saying about reality: What connection is there between the activity of picture-finding and insight? What could you say about someone who sees "cumulonimbus"? "good growing weather"? "nothing"? What connection is there is this cartoon to what we have been learning about reality?

We can go on to discuss too what other factors influence perception. Time, distance, familiarity--all of these enter the picture we create. A writing assignment which asks for a description of a favorite or memorable childhood place (a park, a cabin, a school) as a student remembers it and then as it sees it now (assuming he can return to visit it again) is a sobering reminder that not the place, but the person changes. (The most common reaction I have found in the responses is that the place has grown smaller. And I ask why.) What the student is asked to address in this assignment is not the descriptions of the place, but the change that he sees, and most importantly, reasons for the change. Of course he needs the Specific Detail usually called for in description exercises, but he needs much more--and learns much more about himself.

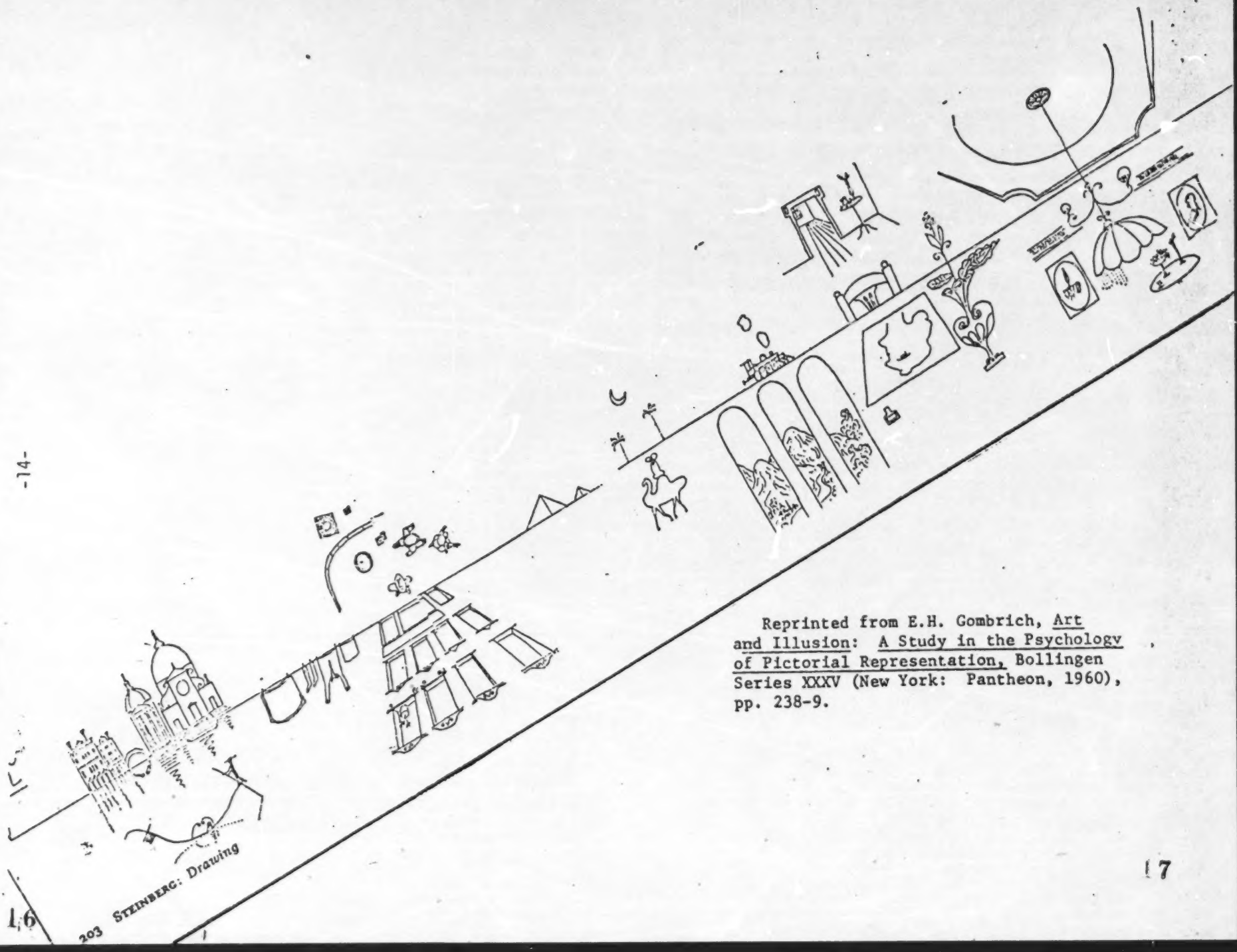
We can help our students to see that perceptions change because we bring the experiences and maturity we have had and gained to bear upon them. But paradoxically, they are also locked into a way of perceiving because of the culture and the culture's language they share. We are fortunate at our university to have a number of foreign students, and I have found it helpful to arrange with the International Student Office to have students of various cultures visit my class. I ask my students to interview them, asking questions

that can lead them to assess cultural differences that affect their ways of seeing the world. What, for example, would a Tai student feel free to ask a friend to do? Lend him money? Arrange a date? Does the difference you see affect the "idea" of friendship? Or what about family relationships? To whom is duty owed? Does "cousin" mean anything different in another culture? Writing up the interviews in a way that clarifies the differences and what these differences mean to them as language users can be a productive assignment.

This experience can lead students one step further--to contemplating a world far different from theirs, a world operated by rules to which the world as we know it has difficulty relating. This is the wildest and most imaginative play possible, and perhaps the most enlightening of all. The best souce I have found for a writing assignment in this vein is Edwin A. Abbott's Flatland,[9] a science-fiction work written by a classicist with a love for mathematics. In one part of the hypothetical universe Abbott creates, an argument about reality is being carried on by two strange characters. One, the King of Lineland, lives in a one-dimensional world where men are segments along a line; the other, the hero, is a square from Flatland, a two-dimensional world. The hero is trying to show that the King's idea of reality is wrong, but he cannot make motion from right to left meaningful because as he disappears from the line (when he tries to demonstrate sideways motion), the King assumes he "dies." There is no accommodation possible because no shared perceptions exist, and the meeting ends in force and invective. I ask students to hypothesize a conversation they would conduct with some creature from another world, a world ordered by ideas we simply do not admit. I ask them to role-play each participant: to be the visitor, questioning and suspicious but trying to understand; themselves, patient, clear, helpful.

They can try to explain any "subject" they wish: a football game, a wedding reception, a rock concert, a final exam. The writing assignment is a paper talking about what relationship this exercise has to the whole problem of what reality is. Is true accomodation possible? In what terms?

Not long ago, I had to defend my idea of using language as a playful activity as the focus of my teaching to one of my colleagues, who, I suspect, was sure that either senility or despair had forced me to join, instead of try to beat, those who stand against Serious Teaching. The most effective argument I brought to my defense that day was a piece of student writing I had received--not an outstandingly written paper, but certainly a much more lively, thoughtful, and exciting one than the papers I usually get. Instead of sameness and dullness, I had a glimpse in that paper of interest, joy, maybe even a little vision. I may not have convinced my colleague, but I think I may be "playing right" at last.



203 STEINBERG: Drawing

Reprinted from E.H. Gombrich, Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation, Bollingen Series XXXV (New York: Pantheon, 1960), pp. 238-9.

NOTES

[1]Quoted in Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 212.

[2]Foreword.

[3]"Education by Poetry: A Meditative Monologue," in The Play of Language, eds. Leonard Dean, Walker Gibson, and Kenneth Wilson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 387.

[4]The Works of Plato, Jowett trans. (New York: Modern Library, 1928), p. 327.

[5]Quoted in The Limits of Language, ed. Walker Gibson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1962), p. 101.

[6]Quoted in The Limits of Language, p. 81.

[7](New York: Macmillan, 1958), p. 5.

[8]"Play and the Teaching of Writing," in The Play of Language, pp. 281-7.

[9]Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions, 6th ed. (New York: Dover Reprints, 1952).